

**BUILDING TRUST BEFORE AUTOMATION:
ESTONIA'S INTEGRATION OF AI IN ITS COURTS**

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ABSTRACT

Estonia's use of artificial intelligence ("AI") in its courts is often misunderstood. As a leading example of digital court administration, Estonia has attracted an outsized claim: that it pioneered "robot judges." This label, however, misses the real story. Estonia's courts have not replaced judges with autonomous decision-makers. They have used digital tools and targeted automation to reduce administrative work while leaving judicial decisions to human judges.

For jurisdictions evaluating the integration of AI into their courts, distinguishing among uses of AI is essential. Estonia's experience suggests that the first question for courts should not be how quickly to adopt AI, but whether they have the safeguards, digital infrastructure and review procedures needed to use it safely and effectively. Its administrative tools differ from systems elsewhere that offer sentencing recommendations, draft legal reasoning or influence a court's decision.

I. THE ROBOT JUDGE MISCONCEPTION

Estonia is often cited in discussions of "robot judges," but the phrase gives a misleading impression of what the country has actually done.

The "robot judge" narrative appears to trace back to a 2019 article suggesting that Estonia was preparing an autonomous system to decide claims without a human judge. That framing quickly took a life of its own, creating the impression that Estonia has built, or was building, courts in which AI could decide cases without human oversight.

Estonia's Ministry of Justice has rejected that account, stating that there was no such project and no plan to develop one for the foreseeable future.¹ The more accurate picture is narrower and more instructive: Estonia's current tools assist judges and court staff with administrative tasks, while judicial decisions remain with human judges. The Ministry's 2022 statement drew a further distinction between a machine-learning tool and automation of a defined payment-order process. Treating those as the same kind of "AI judge" obscures what each system does and where human checks enter the workflow.

II. WHAT ESTONIA ACTUALLY USES TODAY

The deployed AI tools described by Estonia's Ministry in 2022 were transcription and anonymization; its payment-order department used procedural automation, not an AI judge. Together these tools support court administration without establishing that AI decides cases or performs judicial reasoning. Transcription and anonymization outputs are reviewed by court staff, but the payment-order workflow is partly automated; human review requirements differ by process. That distinction is practical, not just semantic. A draft transcript helps a clerk prepare an accurate record; anonymization helps prepare a public decision; and payment-order automation moves documents through a specified procedure. None of

¹ Ministry of Justice and Digital Affairs (Estonia), "Estonia does not develop AI Judge," 16 February 2022, payment-order and machine-learning paragraphs. <https://www.justdigi.ee/en/news/estonia-does-not-develop-ai-judge>

those uses, as described in the cited accounts, establishes an autonomous system for weighing evidence or deciding disputed legal questions.

The most prominent example is Salme, a speech-recognition tool that transforms court proceedings into text format. The 2022 account describes an operator assigning microphones to hearing participants so that the software can associate speech with speakers. Salme then produces a draft transcript, with real-time and offline transcription options. The same account says that recordings, transcripts and hearing protocols move between Salme and the Court Information System through Estonia's X-Road data-exchange layer. It is then edited by a human clerk, who is identified on the final transcript, to produce the official version. It is not a hands-free tool that replaces a court clerk since it requires manual editing, with oversight, to be functional.²

The real strength of Salme is that it allows for the creation of a workable first draft instead of a court clerk having to type everything out from scratch. A 2022 Estonian public-sector account reported an example of fourteen recorded hours requiring an estimated 112 staff hours to transcribe and described Salme as achieving 92 percent transcription precision at the time; these are historical, source-reported figures, not verified current system-wide performance.³ Accuracy depends on how much voice identification can be extracted from the audio, which degrades significantly in the presence of multiple speakers. This necessitates a human editor throughout the process, not merely as a failsafe for rare errors, but rather as a continuous part of the workflow. Time-stamped notes can help a reviewer return to the relevant audio and check disputed passages. Salme was trained for court and justice vocabulary; its developer cautioned that use in another sector would require retraining for that sector's language. Faster transcription therefore does not eliminate the need to verify names, speaker attribution or consequential wording.⁴

Another AI tool, Krat, assists Estonia with one of its judicial priorities, transparency, by efficiently anonymizing its court decisions. Krat uses AI to automatically scan court documents for any potentially identifying information, removing it, and substituting anonymous identifiers.⁵ When Krat was first deployed, it had its growing pains, as it mistakenly removed or replaced some key information; however, these mistakes were caught and manually corrected before the redacted versions of the documents were publicly published. The cited sources describe pre-publication corrections but do not establish whether post-publication errors have occurred.

A third tool, the payment-order system, represents automation of case administration and payment processing. Estonia's Ministry of Justice reported in 2022 that around half of civil cases passed through its payment-order department, primarily for monetary claims. The then-current workflow generated and sent documents electronically but retained some manual controls, including checking debtor contact details; fuller automation was a plan, not an accomplished fact. An objection sends the claim into

² Invest in Estonia, "Introducing Salme, Estonian courts' speech recognition assistant" (2022), reported transcription time and precision. <https://investinestonia.com/introducing-salme-estonian-courts-speech-recognition-assistant/>

³ Invest in Estonia, "Introducing Salme, Estonian courts' speech recognition assistant" (2022), reported transcription time and precision. <https://investinestonia.com/introducing-salme-estonian-courts-speech-recognition-assistant/>

⁴ Tilde, "Estonian Courts Shift to Automated Transcription with Salme" (2024). <https://tilde.ai/asr-solution-for-estonian-courts/>

⁵ Oxford Institute of Technology and Justice, Estonia country profile. <https://www.techandjustice.bsg.ox.ac.uk/research/estonia>

ordinary proceedings.⁶ This is procedural automation, not evidence that AI already decides claims or that every step has a judge's approval. The Ministry described the payment-order process as a limited procedure with defined steps, handled in one court department. Its 2022 statement described fuller automation as a future possibility. Readers should not turn that proposal into a claim that judges have already been replaced, or assume that the controls for an uncontested payment order would be adequate for a disputed case.

III. ESTONIA'S PROSPECTIVE INTEGRATION

Estonia's 2024–2030 court development plan distinguishes between existing tools and proposals at different stages of preparation and risk.⁷ Its central aim is to reduce administrative work without displacing judges. The plan is not evidence that every proposed tool has been deployed.

Stage I proposes extending automation to processes similar to those in the payment-order system. The plan calls for greater automation in the land and business registries and a further shift toward electronic court-to-citizen communications. It also proposes treating case files as structured data to reduce repeated entry and make records easier to process. Online forms will assist citizens in submitting minor claims, such as child support, by guiding them through the necessary procedures. Procedural documents and decision templates will be generated automatically based on case information to streamline signing processes. The plan also proposes AI-prepared records or summaries of relevant facts based on hearing transcripts. Translation may be based on AI or translation software and edited by a human when necessary. Duplicate evidence, identity verification for video conferences, basic chatbots with a defined escalation procedure for human assistance, and case management systems for distributing cases based on workload and specialty will supplement the tools mentioned.

Stage II addresses proposals that require more preparation, including higher-risk tools. Estonia's plans include software that will manage document circulation as well as perform certain regulatory checks before minor civil cases are submitted for hearing, live interpretation of court hearings, and a case management tool to help judges manage their dockets. Other proposals would extract disputed facts from large document collections and detect manipulated media. Search functionality for Estonia's domestic jurisprudence and the European Union's jurisprudence will be created, as well as an online platform for resolving non-minor disputes outside of the courtroom. The plan envisages AI-prepared draft settlements in formula-based matters, including maintenance, default interest and price reductions, for a judge to check and correct; it does not establish that such a tool is in use or that AI independently issues decisions.⁸

Under the plan, judges would be able to correct AI-prepared draft settlements and would have to check them against legislation and case law before adoption. That review requirement is part of the proposal, not evidence of how an existing tool works.

⁶ Ministry of Justice and Digital Affairs (Estonia), "Estonia does not develop AI Judge," 16 February 2022, payment-order and machine-learning paragraphs. <https://www.justdigi.ee/en/news/estonia-does-not-develop-ai-judge>

⁷ Estonian Courts, Court Development Plan 2024–2030, Digitisation of the Court, pp. 11–13, Stage I and Stage II. Official PDF at riigikohus.ee, Court Development Plan (2024–2030).

⁸ Estonian Courts, Court Development Plan 2024–2030, Digitisation of the Court, pp. 11–13, Stage I and Stage II. Official PDF at riigikohus.ee, Court Development Plan (2024–2030).

IV. THE NEED FOR HUMAN SCRUTINY AND SAFEGUARDS IN COURTS

Estonia's cautious approach is sensible against the backdrop of what can go wrong when courts use AI without sufficient human review and safeguards. The issue is not novelty. Court decisions affect individual rights, may guide later cases and must remain accountable. If an AI tool introduces error into that process, the harm may extend beyond an individual case to public trust in the courts. The EU AI Act lists AI systems intended to assist a judicial authority in researching or interpreting facts and law and applying law to concrete facts under Annex III(8)(a), subject to the classification rules in Article 6.⁹

An October 2025 U.S. Senate Judiciary Committee inquiry questioned two federal judges after their orders contained errors and were corrected or withdrawn. The committee asked whether judges or staff used generative AI, but its inquiry does not establish that AI caused the errors. Whatever caused the errors, the episodes show why judges must check facts and citations before issuing rulings.¹⁰

China provides a different comparison. Its courts and prosecutors have used tools for case analysis, draft judgments and sentencing recommendations, while official policy frames AI as support rather than a replacement for judicial discretion.¹¹ These uses raise a question that formal human sign-off cannot answer alone: whether a recommendation anchors a decision or makes it harder for a judge to reach a different result.¹²

The risks also arise without a formal recommendation. In 2023, a Colombian judge included ChatGPT responses in a ruling concerning an autistic child's medical care, while stating that the decision remained his own.¹³ The public accounts do not establish how much weight the judge gave those responses.¹⁴ A court must independently verify legal answers from a general-purpose tool. This example differs from Estonia's transcription workflow: a clerk can compare a draft record with the underlying audio, whereas a legal answer calls for checking the governing law and the facts of the case. The relevant safeguard depends on the task the system performs.

India illustrates the pressure to use new tools amid heavy caseloads. A 2023 report counted more than 40 million pending cases in its lower courts in the preceding year and described a judge using ChatGPT to assist with a bail ruling.¹⁵ That historical count is not a current backlog figure. The broader risk is that a legal answer generated from incomplete or unreliable records may be treated as settled law unless a human checks the underlying sources. Salme's reported transcription precision cannot be generalized to legal reasoning tools or other courts.

⁹ Regulation (EU) 2024/1689, Annex III(8)(a), European Commission official text. <https://ai-act-service-desk.ec.europa.eu/en/ai-act/annex-3>

¹⁰ U.S. Senate Committee on the Judiciary, "Grassley Scrutinizes Federal Judges' Apparent AI Use in Drafting Error-Ridden Rulings," 6 October 2025, inquiry and case summaries. <https://www.judiciary.senate.gov/press/rep/releases/grassley-scrutinizes-federal-judges-apparent-ai-use-in-drafting-error-ridden-rulings>

¹¹ Oxford Institute of Technology and Justice, China country profile. <https://www.techandjustice.bsg.ox.ac.uk/research/china>

¹² Eunice Chong et al., "The Smart Court – A New Pathway to Justice in China?" *International Journal for Court Administration* (2021). <https://iacajournal.org/articles/10.36745/ijca.367>

¹³ "Colombian judge uses ChatGPT in ruling on child's medical rights case," CBS News (2 February 2023). <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/colombian-judge-uses-chatgpt-in-ruling-on-childs-medical-rights-case/>

¹⁴ "Judge says he used ChatGPT in court ruling," Legal Cheek (7 February 2023). <https://www.legalcheek.com/2023/02/judge-says-he-used-chatgpt-in-court-ruling/>

¹⁵ Adam Smith, Anastasia Moloney and Avi Asher-Schapiro, "Are AI chatbots in courts putting justice at risk?," *Context* (4 May 2023). <https://www.context.news/ai/are-ai-chatbots-in-courts-putting-justice-at-risk>

A recurring theme across these examples is that judicial AI becomes most concerning when its outputs begin to resemble recommendations, legal reasoning or rulings without sufficient human scrutiny. Recognizing this potential risk, the UN Special Rapporteur on the independence of judges and lawyers warned governments not to adopt new technologies as an end in itself, but only where they support the administration of justice while preserving the role of a human judge.¹⁶ The EU AI Act lists specified judicial-assistance systems in Annex III(8)(a). Article 6(3) allows a limited exception where an Annex III system poses no significant harm risk and satisfies a listed condition, such as a narrow procedural task, but that classification depends on the system’s intended purpose and actual effect.¹⁷ Salme and Krat should not be assigned a legal risk class on the current record. The comparison with the AI Act nevertheless clarifies why intended purpose matters. A system that merely organizes records is not evaluated in the same way as a system intended to help apply law to the facts of a concrete case. Courts should document that purpose, test output against source material and preserve a meaningful path for correction before giving a tool a larger role.

V. TAKEAWAYS FOR OTHER COURT SYSTEMS

The examples from the United States, Colombia, China, and India demonstrate why those safeguards matter. AI tools can fabricate legal support, produce inconsistent answers, reinforce automation bias or generate unreliable outputs when the underlying data is incomplete. The risk is greatest when an AI system begins to influence judicial reasoning, sentencing, factual conclusions or case outcomes, especially if the judge must justify departing from the AI’s recommendation.

Estonia’s model points toward a more credible and thoughtful path: use AI strategically, test it against real court workflows, acknowledge and disclose its limitations and expand only where human oversight remains practical and meaningful. Administrative tools and decision-support tools require different safeguards; when a tool may affect the outcome, independent human review and a record of its role become more important. The broader lesson is institutional discipline: courts should judge a tool by whether it supports sound decisions, fair procedures and public confidence in the rule of law.

¹⁶ OHCHR, “States must avoid techno-solutionism, keep judges in control of AI use in judiciary,” 22 October 2025. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2025/10/states-must-avoid-techno-solutionism-keep-judges-control-ai-use-judiciary-un>

¹⁷ Regulation (EU) 2024/1689, Article 6(3), European Commission official text. <https://ai-act-service-desk.ec.europa.eu/en/ai-act/article-6>